DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 628 SO 018 616

AUTHOR Silva, John de Oliveira E
TITLE The Fatal Panacea: The Emigrant Experience in the Novels of Ferreira de Castro.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 15p.
AVAILABLE FROM John de Oliveira E Silva, La Guardia Community College, 31-10 Thomson Ave., Long Island City, NY 11101.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Book Reviews; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences; Developing Nations; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Latin American Culture; *Latin American Literature; *Latin Americans; Social Change
IDENTIFIERS Brazil; Portugal

ABSTRACT

The twin emigration sagas of Ferreira de Castro (1898-1974), "Emigrantes" (1928) and "A Selva" (1930) embody what has been described as the primary driving forces of emigration: hunger and injustice. The main protagonists of "Emigrantes" and "A Selva," Manuel and Alberto, illustrate these forces. Manuel, a middle-aged Portuguese farmer decides to improve his and his family's lot by going to Brazil. Alberto is a young, university-educated son of a prominent Portuguese family who is forced to leave his homeland due to political forces. The protagonists' early limitations of character, their experiences and disillusionments in the New World, and finally their role as victims of the process of emigration is examined in this paper. From disillusionment emerges redemption and new insight; enlightenment comes through human relationships experienced in the New World. (NL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED291628

THE FATAL PANACEA:

THE EMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN THE NOVELS OF FERREIRA DE CASTRO

JOHN DE OLIVEIRA E SILVA

LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY

COLLEGE OF C.U.N.Y.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John De Oliveira E Silva

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO018616

* * * \

We have all heard the success stories of New World immigration: of those fugitives from adversity fortunate enough to find food, freedom, and hope on American shores. We have also heard from those less fortunate immigrants who encountered in the New World suffering and misery nearly on a par with that in the Old, but who, nevertheless, lived at least to see their progeny have a better life than theirs. Rarely, however do we hear from those for whom the immigrant experience was apparently a fiasco, those who utterly failed to improve their or their progeny's material lot as a result of their decision to emigrate. These are the denizens of Emigrantes (1928) and A Selva (1930), the twin emigration sagas of Ferreira de Castro (1898-1974), the eminent and much-translated Portuguese novelist, himself a child laborer in the Amazon Jungle just before the first World War. Taken together, these novels embody what the author has elsewhere proclaimed to be the primary driving forces of emigration: hunger and injustice.

These two novels are straightforward accounts whose fast-paced plots illustrate both Ferreira de Castro's rich characterizations and his primary theme that emigration is a sign of something wrong, not right with the world. In the earlier novel, Emigrantes Manuel da Bouça, an illiterate, middle-aged farmer, decides that the only way he can improve his and his family's lot is to get rich quick in Brazil. In order, however, to finance the journey, Manuel has no choice but to mortgage the small strips of land he owns. The situation in the sequel, A Selva, contrasts interestingly. Here, a young, university-educated son of a prominent monarchist military officer, is forced to leave Portugal for Brazil because, as a confirmed monarchist himself, he is a persona non grata in republican

Portugal. Early in the novel, further, Alberto is packed off by an unscrupulous uncle to work on one of the notorious rubber plantations in the Amazon Jungle. Alberto is ostensibly not wanted by anyone. Injustice, then, more than hunger, is the cause of his emigration experience.

Despite their apparent divergences, Manuel and Alberto are really not that different. Indeed, they constitute what to Ferreira de Castro are the twin facets of the emigrating every-man of the twentieth century. Both scarred, if not stunted, by their experiences in the mother country, they nevertheless achieve the capacity to learn, to feel, and to grow in their new milieu, despite, or perhaps because of, their horrifying experiences there. Although failures as emigrants in the economic sense, Manuel and Alberto manage to bring something back far less tangible than material wealth: a new insight into the human condition and a new awareness of themselves. These emigrants, the subjects of this paper, have little press and receive no fanfare. Structurally, I will take up first these protagonists' early limitations of character, then their experiences and disillusionments in the New World, and finally growth as victims of the process of emigration.

Manuel, of course, is stunted largely because he has been denied a formal education. The inability to read and write, however, is not accompanied by a concomitant inability to dream for a better life. While the small strips of land that he owns bear nothing, he wistfully covets an adjoining large tract of

land that lies uncultivated because it is run by an absentee landlord (E 22). Manuel also dreams of status, the status of seeing his daughter marry a man of substance, not the poor farmer she wants for a husband. All of this is, I suppose, to be expected, but when Manuel unilaterally, without consultation with his wife and daughter, decides to heed rumors of easy prosperity in Brazil and of easy methods of raising money for the trip, he manifests an ugly undemocratic and impulsive quality, and, in the ensuing argument with them, reveals a towering stubbornness. One gets the impression that Manuel did not consult his wife and daughter beforehand for fear that they would have dissuaded him. After all, their arguments are forceful and sensible. "How," they argue, "could you have trusted the unscrupulous money lender that you consulted?" And "how can you be sure of what you signed when you can't even read or write and don't even know what a mortgage is?" Credulity and stubborness are clearly two of Manuel's most fatal flaws, in the early portions of the novel.

By the time of the argument, of course, it is too late to dissuade Manuel. His fate has been sealed. Beyond his control is the play of events and experiences that will soon rush upon him: the sight of other peasants in interminably long lines on an all-night vigil at the Brazilian Consulate in Lisbon; the crossing itself; the con-man tactics pulled off by emigration officials in Santos; the sobering tales of failure and ruination in Brazil by emigrants of earlier years (even those thought to be doing most well); and finally his own fiasco as first a bean

picker on a coffee plantation and then as a shop worker in Santos, without a place to call home, and what is worse in Manuel's case, with wages no better than those he had earned in Portugal.

It may be said that Alberto, on the other hand, has been stunted precisely because he has received a formal education. As a law student under the monarchy, he emerges from Portugal with the conviction that the world is divided between the favored class (to which he belongs) and the rabble (to which he doesn't). So elitist is Alberto that, on the crossing from Belem down the Madeira River into the Amazon region, he is frankly repelled by his fellow passengers, some of whom will soon be his fellow rubber tappers. The jumble of divergent races and members of the lowest economic classes on board only serves to rankle him, as does the pidgeon Portuguese that jars his ears. Alberto therefore hangs out in an extreme corner of the deck, an emblem of his intellectual and emotional isolation from the human race. Such an orientation, however, as in the case of Manuel, will not stand much reality testing in the jungles of Brazil.

Like Manuel, Alberto trusts unawarrantedly. For example, early in the novel, he labors under the misconception that, as a monarchist with some breeding, he will encounter little difficulty in currying favor with well-established Portuguese-Brazilian entrepreneurs. After all, aren't the moneyed classes essentially rightist in ideology? At one point, when the steamer (the Justo Clermont) transporting the laborers to the Amazon docks temporarily in Manaus, Alberto defiantly disobeys orders and disembarks, certain that he will encounter no difficulty in

finding a good job. Anything would be better than fraternizing any longer with half-breeds and flunkies. Undaunted by reports of pervasive unemployment in the town, he asks to speak to its most powerful figure, a local "commandant," the head of a business which deals in commissions and consignments (opening doors to the great fortunes of a period when rubber was known as black gold.) The conversation makes it clear that this commandant not only is unmoved by Alberto's credentials, he feels no solidarity with him and his monarchic background. In this New World setting, everything else walks, but moneyalone talks.

As in the case of Manuel, Alberto's subsequent experiences serve only to undermine his earlier misconceptions about man and life. Like Manuel, he is forced to work under intolerable conditions. Like all the laborers on the coffee plantation and the rubber fields, both are required to purchase their own supplies from the local captain at outrageous prices, prices well above their incomes. Plainly, it is a debt that never gets paid. But there is an added ingredient of danger in Alberto's work: the constant threat of Indian attack. As occurs in Emigrantes, it is an uneducated, but human and humane mulatto, Firmino, who saves Alberto from true ruin, since the latter lacks both the physique and the stamina to do the work. Such a state of affairs was not what the young monarchist had anticipated during his isolated voyage down the Madeira River.

Alberto learns his lessons, and, to a lesser extent, so does Manuel. Both characters change considerably during the course of their respective novels. To put it briefly, Manuel learns that emigration is only seldom a key to prosperity, while

Alberto recognizes that injustice is always on the doorstep of the poor and deprived. One may properly ask, what brought these changes about?

Essentially, whatever Manuel and Alberto understand at the conclusion of the novels derives from their experiences in the New World. And this fact accords well with a passing remark made by Ferreira de Castro, expressing some small gratitude to the adversities he suffered in the Amazon area for the character they afforded him. What teaches both protagonists most is a combination of the words and deeds of others, their own experiences, and, most important of all, their reflections on those experiences.

For example, Manuel, himself a slow learner, determined to believe that emigration works, learns from his own condition (as an emigrant) that the biggest problem in the world is inequality of opportunity. Were that problem resolved, there would be no need for emigration. But until then, emigration will be construed by the poor as their panacea. In the latter half of the novel, he encounters new emigrants, as resolute in their unwillingness to learn as he had been a decade earlier. From his own experiences as a peon not earning nearly enough to remunerate the captain for supplies rendered, as the lover of a generous and kind mulatto woman who is mistreated and disregarded by the authorities of the coffee plantation, and as a recent widower who has lost touch with his daughter, Manuel easily comes to the conclusion that no country is good for poor people: "estou em crer que não ha terra boa para os pobres" (220). Finally, with the encouragement of Benvinda, this woman, he makes

the break from the coffee plantation and returns to Santos to find work. None of this is to intimate that Manuel has experienced an 180 degree turn; his is considerably less. When a workers' insurrection erupts in Santos, Manuel refuses to join his friends and companions because, in his mind, the social inequities in Brazil are not his concern, as he is a Portuguese. Harshly rebuked by one of this closest associates (Hermenegildo), who exhorts him to be a proletarian and a man (243), not a nationalist, Manuel makes a pretense of battle, but manages only to stumble upon a fallen ally, in the process discovering and purloining his jewelry. It is this windfall and nothing else that finances a return trip to Portugal. But in his homeland, Manuel, whose primary goal as an emigrant had been wealth, power and importance, is frankly mortified by the admiring glances of his former compatriots. They think that he is another in the procession of successful emigrants to Brazil. Like Manuel a decade and a half earlier, they want to believe that emigration is the solution to their problems, and somehow Manuel is too proud to admit the sad truth. Uncomfortable with the sham, he resolves to leave Portugal forever (for Brazil) in order to pass his final years in anonymity. The greatest of the ironies is that not even with the wealth retrieved from the body of the dead revolutionary is Manuel able to afford a gravesite for his wife: His valedictory to her expresses this:

> I worked so very many years. And yet even though I robbed a dead man, I am unable to afford a decent grave for you. (301)

Similarly, Alberto grows as a result of both his personal suffering and his acknowledgment of the suffering of others, particularly his fellow rubber tappers. One of them, the virtuous Firmino, would, because of his lowly state and misuse of standard Portuguese, have been totally shunned by the young monarchist earlier in the novel. But after months together in the rubber fields, Alberto comes to esteem him as a tower of virtue, goodness, and resourcefulness. Although always looking out for his Portuguese companion, whom he genuinely worries about, Firmino has himself had a life of great hardship. He has been working in the Amazon for six years only because his debts to the local captain have run out of control. One may be able to get through the day, but there is no tomorrow.

Having been banqueted with promises of a quick fortune at the time of emigration, Firmino left behind (in his native land of Ceará) his dear mother, whose subsequent death crushed him. Also left behind were a younger brother, who was later beguiled into working on another rubber plantation, despite Firmino's written exhortations to the contrary, and his sweetheart, the girl for whom he (like Ferreira de Castro himself), had originally embarked (to improve his fortunes) in the first place. However, after four years, she grew weary of waiting and married someone economically better off than Firmino (132). So, though still a young man, Firmino has lost his family and his beloved. He nevertheless, faces each day with fortitude, even cheer, and dreams of someday finding real work and of returning home.

As I mentioned above, without Firmino's help, Alberto would not have survived a day in Todos-Os-Santos (the rubber field where they work). In the jungle, it would seem, the uneducated mulatto is superior to the educated white monarchist. Alberto lacks the skill to milk the trees without damaging them; he lacks the savvy to smell out Indian attacks before they happen; and the resourcefulness, strength, and stamina needed to get through the day. Ironically, despite his limitations, Alberto's fortunes dramatically improve in the latter third of the novel. When a clerical position in the local office suddenly materializes, he is offered a new job (as a bookkeeper). And then, upon hearing that the Portuguese Republic has offered amnesty to all monarchists, he writes his mother for the needed funds to pay off his final debt to the captain. Presumably auctioning off some rare family heirlooms, his mother manages to raise the necessary sum, making Alberto free, free to return home and resume his law studies, but not as a monarchist, he now says. And, when asked if he had turned republican, Alberto responds, "neither approach interests me. I have learned much during the last few years, especially since I came here..." "I am a different man now." And what is even more shocking, the captain, in a rare generous mood, refuses the money of the Portuguese, this new denizen of his office, and, occasionally, dinner table. The act causes Alberto to ponder:

> What about the others, his companions in the rubber fields? Was it he who deserved restitution? Or they, who had spent their lives in that jungle

prison far longer than he...
all their youth... all their
lives, their ambitions and
life fantasies snuffed out. (300-1)

Alberto is no stranger to injustice, but this is of a far more pernicious sort, for it is racist and economic in origin. His ponderings continue:

If he had not been white, if
he had not been groomed for
the clerical position by
sympathetic office workers,
if he hadn't been there ready
and able at the right time,
he would be out there again,
tapping rubber, with Firmino,
trying to survive the hour
and risking their lives at
every turn to gather riches
they would never enjoy. The
captain cancelled his debt,
only because he (Alberto)
was no longer one of them,
no longer a lowly tapper, and
because as a white man able
to count and write, he was
able to raise fast funds when
he had to. (300-1 .)

He concludes than human justice is not based on absolute worth but on social relationships, and it is therefore most denied to

the poor and needy, who most require it.

Since society does not offer him a like access to prosperity, Firmino must invent his own and escape both from the rubber field and his unpaid debts. At this point, he turns to his former companion for help, as he himself had been turned to so many times before. And he is not let down. Alberto risks his new-found felicity and his life by smuggling him a file to cut through the chains of oppression and make his get-away. We can presume that this will be Alberto's role as a young lawyer: to help make available to society's forgotten ones an access route to justice. His new political philosophy is a direct consequence of the adversities suffered, friendships formed, and discoveries made as a chattel-laborer on the Amazon. He remarks:

> I have a hope for universal justice; of course, I realize that mankind is still far from the collective growth of which I dream. It will surely come, maybe in an evolutionary way. But, as evolution takes so long and our lives become ever-shorter, at times I think that our thirst for justice will be quenched only by our eternal quest of of it.(301)

By Manuel and Alberto, then, we are afforded a different sort of emigration story. Both restricted in their country of origin, they forge on to new shores in the hope of finding

some answer to their need for food and justice. But such an answer is not forthcoming. What is awaiting them, instead, are the most harrowing experiences of their lives, a picture of naked human greed and injustice, effecting a profound and sober disillusionment on their parts. But in that disillusionment lies their redemption, for it is accompanied by a new insight into and, more importantly, a new bond with, humanity. At last and finally, our protagonists come to understand that men are not islands and that each person's well-being is intimately tied up with that of his or her fellow. Although at great personal cost and suffering, Manuel and Alberto have shed their Old World selves, grown anew, and finally joined the human race, and the world.

List of Works Cited

Ferreira De Castro. Emigrantes. Lisbon: Guimarães Editores, 1928.

_____. A Selva. Lisbon: Guimarães Editores, 1930.